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My Work/Life Balance Lessons

By Brian Peterson

My current assignment as the project manager for a group of Key Bank buildings has given me better work-life balance than other projects I've been involved with previously. Most of the time, my ability to get the balance I need depends in large part on factors such as the size of the project I'm working on, the number of people on the project, and the management style of the team leaders. Ultimately, though, getting the balance I need is my responsibility and it's up to me to communicate that it's important to me.

In my case, work-life balance means having enough time to do the things that recharge me. I've noticed that when I have time after work to go rock-climbing, I start the next day feeling twice as strong, clear-headed, and confident because my mental state is better. I think some of my attitude as a 28-year-old is representative of my generation, too. We want to take our vacations and are less willing to work 14-hour days and weekends.

Here's what I do to help make sure I get the balance that works for me at this point in my life and career:

Learn from the experiences of others. Some of the more senior people I've met in the industry have recommended leaving the job behind when you walk out the door at the end of the day. Others have expressed regret about not spending more time with their children when they were younger. They have taught me that you work harder and more effectively if you're taking care of yourself and the ones you care about.

Take your vacations. I just got back from a two-week trip to Thailand and feel completely recharged. I had to work hard before I left to get things organized for the people who would

The Power of the Mini Me-Meeting

Save your daily sanity and insure your important objectives don't get pushed aside by scheduling Mini Me-Meetings during your day. Here's how and why they work wonders. (Reading time 180 seconds.)

Tom had flooded me with frustration over what he saw as the unattainable demands his job put on his time. "I just go from meeting to meeting and at each one I get more To Do's. Before I can even organize to get some things checked off, or delegated, I'm in another meeting adding to the list. So the list just keeps growing." Tom had made it clear that he rarely was able to get done what he had scheduled for the day as new "stuff" and meetings pushed it aside.

Cheryl on the other hand, working in the same environment, with similar demands, felt in control. She usually had the time to make progress on her intended plans each day. She also was able to reprioritize and execute on the new tasks that needed her attention and schedule or delegate others.

These two real people are representative of millions of others who tend to fall into these can do or can't do categories. Why do these people working in similar atmospheres get such dissimilar results?

A key part of that answer lies in what Cheryl did every day, that Tom did not. She committed time on her schedule for meetings with herself... what we have come to call Me-Meetings. A me-meeting should not be confused with unscheduled time. They are very different.

Clients tell me they leave unscheduled time in their day in the hopes of catching up on projects or planning, but they often don't get those results. Instead someone else schedules the time for them, or when they are asked to do something during that time, they accept.

This happens because we view "unscheduled time" as time that is just waiting to be filled up. And that's okay. You should leave part of your day unscheduled to be potentially filled by the immediate needs that come up during that day.

Me-Meetings serve a different purpose. A Me Meeting, as it implies, is a commitment of time to meet with yourself for a specific purpose. Think of a Me-Meeting in the same way you would a team or client meeting or phone appointment. When you have a meeting scheduled from 2 to 2:30 you don't let yourself get scheduled to meet with someone else at the same time. It's important to record your me-meetings in your planner and on your shared calendar so others don't schedule that time for you. If someone asks you to do something during that time, just tell them, "I have an appointment, but it will be over at 2:30. Can we meet then?"

Planned Me-Meetings take two forms. The Mini Me-Meeting helps you keep control of your day. Longer Me-Meeting provide you with the time to make progress on important previous commitments you have made to co-workers and clients.

Mini Me-Meetings: Mini Me-Meetings are usually 10 to 20 minute time blocks for planning, reprioritizing and updating your day. One in the morning and one in the early afternoon will do wonders for your stress level and productivity. Use this alone time



support me while I was gone and there was a fair amount of catching up to do when I returned, but that's a small price to pay for time away. With our project volume easing up now because of the economy, it's a good time to take time off.

Create systems that others can use to help you. Before I left on vacation, I wrote a two-page document explaining my system and what needed to happen while I was gone. After reviewing it with people on my team, I let everyone involved in the project know who to contact for information related to different parts of my job. Having systems in place made it easier for others while I was gone.

Communication is key. I improve efficiency by scheduling meetings, conference calls, and job walks so that I can both share and get information. I let people know when I'm available as well as when I'm not, and when I'm not, I make sure they know who will have the answers in my absence.

Brian Peterson is currently a project manager in the Denver business unit.

Quotes

"Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is probably the reason why so few engage in it."

"You can't build a reputation on what you are going to do."

"One of the greatest discoveries a man makes, one of his great surprises, is to find he can do what he was afraid he couldn't do."

"Before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success."

Henry Ford (July 30, 1863 – April 7, 1947) was the founder of the Ford Motor Company and creator of modern assembly lines.

to do what Tom wasn't doing. Update the additional to do's from the day, reprioritize as necessary and schedule or delegate those new tasks. Your morning Mini Me-Meeting should also be used to look over yesterday's calendar to make sure nothing fell through the cracks.

Longer Me-Meetings: You have to have time to get the work done that comes from your group meetings and your major project priorities. Scheduling longer Me-Meetings, 1 to 2 hours, creates the time each day for those priority activities. Think of the value you'll derive from devoting 1 to 2 hours a day to focusing on nothing else but your most important pending activities. Might you have interruptions during your me-meeting time? Depending on the expectations of your job, absolutely. But you can minimize their impact and still reap the benefits of me meetings by following the tips below.

Tips to Maximize the Value of Me Meetings: The tips that follow will apply to you in different ways depending on your job expectations. In evaluating how you can apply them, don't self-impose reasons they won't work. Once you communicate your purpose to others, they may help you overcome the challenges to carving out regular me-meeting time.

Do not look at emails – Don't use checking your emails as an excuse to escape from doing the important priorities you have planned for this me-meeting. Often our brain resists doing the hard work of tackling a new project or focusing on the most important, so we distract ourselves with something easy. "Oh, let me just check my email..." and off you go. Unless your job demands you respond to emails during regular meetings, you should not do so during me-meetings either.

Have a clean desk – Just like emails are a distraction to switch from your priorities, so to is the temptation to look through those stacks of stuff on your desk. Keep your work surface clear and during your me-meetings only bring out what is relevant to your planned purpose.

Change locations – If possible go to a conference room or other quiet area where you can't be readily found.

To take more control of your time and life try the me-meeting experiment.

Open up your calendar now. Schedule a morning and afternoon mini me-meeting for the next several days to reprioritize and update your day. Then schedule a couple of longer me-meetings to work on specific objectives. When they come up on your calendar, stick to them. As it turned out for Tom and thousands of others, I expect you will reduce your stress, increase your attention to priorities and drive up your productivity.

Enjoy the experiment!

Smiles,

Jim Bird, Publisher

E-tip

Only check and respond to email three or four times a day with focused time (morning – before and after lunch - afternoon.) During those times touch each email once - if you open it, answer it and record required actions in your calendar. This prevents you from being drawn off priority tasks every time an email comes in.